

# **The Impact of the USF Tampa Library Graduate Assistant Program on Career and Professional Development**

**Susan L. Silver  
Virginia P. Cunningham**

**February 2008**

## **Abstract**

The Graduate Assistant program at the University of South Florida Tampa Library has been in place since 1976, and has a long tradition of providing graduate students from the School of Library and Information Science at USF, with training and preparation for careers as librarians, by providing pre-professional, broad-based library experience. Despite the apparent success of this longstanding program, students who complete the program have never been surveyed to gauge the effectiveness of the program. Over one hundred former graduate assistants were contacted and asked to participate in the survey. The survey included thirteen items, ranging from questions about their graduate assistant experience to questions about their career path since leaving USF and their opinions about what effect the graduate assistant program has had on their careers. The 49 responses showed that most Graduate Assistants have gone on to have successful careers as librarians in a variety of different libraries and value the experience they gained by participating in the program.

## **History**

For over 30 years the School of Library and Information Science and the USF Tampa Library together have mentored a steady stream of highly qualified librarians into the profession. Since its inception in 1976, more than 200 students enrolled in the Library and Information Science program at USF have held assistantships at the USF Tampa Library, in a long tradition of providing graduate students from the School of Library and Information Science at USF, with training and preparation for careers as librarians. By offering pre-professional, broad-based library experience, which can easily be combined with a graduate school class schedule in the School of Library and Information Science, the USF Tampa Library's Graduate Assistant Program offers valuable opportunities for library school students. The program has an excellent reputation, especially in the state of Florida. Library directors throughout the state have commented on the high quality of applicants who **have** held assistantships at the USF Library. This reputation is supported by those participants in the program who have gone on to have successful library careers. Many are working in large academic research libraries, although public librarians, school media specialists and special librarians have also been part of the program. The graduate student program has tried to support the Tampa Library's goal of achieving a diverse staff. ALA Spectrum Scholars have participated in the Graduate Assistant Program and several graduate assistants have been fluent in a variety of languages.

Originally graduate assistants provided support for the class, *The Use of the Library*, taught by the reference librarians. The graduate assistants graded assignments and quizzes and helped the

students during their “lab” hour for the two credit hour class. During the late 1970s and the early 1980s the graduate assistant program expanded as more sections of the *Use of the Library* class were offered. Additional state funding helped expand the program to include more library school students. Fall and spring semesters, there were often 12-15 graduate assistants participating in the program. The library school students involved in the program also had the opportunity to teach portions of the classes, under the mentorship of the reference librarians.

In the late 1980s the popular class, *Use of the Library*, moved, by mutual agreement, to the School of Library and Information Science. The Graduate Assistant program expanded and more opportunities were available for the students involved. As part of their library experience, graduate students were given training for work at the reference desk and at the periodicals service desk. Graduate assistants were also assigned to Government Documents and provided reference service in that area. A two week training program was developed, four hours each day, to give them the opportunity to gain experience in public service prior to the start of their assignment. Graduate Assistants were then assigned desk hours during various times throughout the week. Every attempt was made to give them hours with librarians to enhance their learning experience. The use of the graduate assistants during both peak and off peak hours allowed the library to provide excellent service during all hours the building was open.

Since the program’s inception, no formal assessment of the program at USF library has been done. Very little research exists to document program effectiveness among academic libraries that have formal graduate assistant programs in place. Diane Nahl (Nahl, Coder, & Black, 1994) assessed the accuracy of answers graduate assistants gave to reference questions. Stephenson and St. Clair documented their successful implementation of a graduate assistant program using non-LIS students, while Womack and Rupp-Serrano surveyed libraries with graduate assistant programs about various topics, including recruitment, training, supervision and evaluation. (Womack & Rupp-Serrano, 2000) Like Womack and Rupp-Serrano, Qi Wu also outlined a strategy for successful recruitment of graduate assistants (Wu Qi, 2003). More recently, D. Brett Spencer offered solid advice in his 2005 article for new graduate assistants to follow in order to make their experience successful (Spencer, Baker, & Stoddart, 2005)

In reviewing the literature, it is apparent that none of the research has focused on what paths the graduate assistants followed after they graduated or left the program. Did the graduate assistant experience impact their later employment by giving them advantage in when seeking their first professional position? Did the graduate assistants feel that the training they received and experience they graduated help them in their first professional position, and further, do they consider their experience helpful today? Did they find their experience worthwhile and would they recommend the graduate assistant program at USF to current LIS students?

### Methodology

A survey was constructed, using Flashlight Online. Flashlight is a subscription website that is used for creating surveys, feedback forms and rubrics. The advantages of using Flashlight are

Over 200 library science students have participated in the graduate assistant program since 1976. Of those 200+ former graduate assistants 108 were located and e-mail addresses obtained. Many

graduate assistants could not be located, particularly those that had graduated prior to 1990. Of the 108 surveys sent, 49 surveys were returned, a response rate of 45%.

Of the surveys returned 21 were received from those who had worked as graduate assistants between 2001 and 2004, 23 from 1990-1999 graduates and 6 from graduate assistants who graduated between 1980 and 1989. Unfortunately, no responses were received from pre-1980 graduates. This was mainly due to our inability to locate current contact information for the majority of those individuals.

The questions asked in the survey fell into three categories. The first group of questions included quantitative and qualitative questions about the graduate assistant experience itself **and the** second group queried respondents about their career paths since graduation. The last category of questions asked for opinions about the future of the program at USF.

### **Graduate Assistant Experience**

Participants were asked where they worked in the library during their assistantship. Most indicated that their entire assignment was exclusively in reference or another department, while a few worked a split assignment or transferred from one department to another while in the graduate assistant program. Of the 49 respondents, 48 indicated that they had worked in the reference department, 2 in the cataloging department, 7 in media resources, 7 in government documents and 2 in collection development assignment.

The Graduate Assistant program at the USF Library evolved from exclusively grading papers for the LIS 2001 class when the program began to most recently participating in a variety of professional and pre-professional activities in the reference department and throughout the library. While 45 of the 49 respondents had provided service at the reference desk, many also engaged in a range of activities that included grading papers for LIS 2001, bibliographic verification for the Interlibrary Loan Department, creating instructional aids, lobby displays, participation in the reference department's virtual reference service, assisting librarians with collection development activities, and even serving on departmental and library-wide committees. Given their "temporary" status as library employees and the limited number of hours graduate assistants worked each week, it is notable that they were able to participate in so many activities.

### **Profile of Former Graduate Assistants**

Of the 49 respondents, 45 (92%) indicated they were currently employed as a librarian, while 3(6%) indicated they were not. Despite the USF library being an academic library, many graduate assistants have gone on to pursue careers in many different kinds of library settings, as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
**Type of library currently employed in**

<b>Type</b>	<b>Number (percentage)</b>
-------------	----------------------------

Academic Library	30 (61%)
Public Library	7 (14%)
Special Library	4 (8%)
Media Center	2 (4%)
Other	4 (8%)

The survey asked what their job title is in their current position. Figure 2 illustrates that while many graduate assistants have gone on to become reference librarians, the positions that many of them hold are quite varied through the profession.

**Figure 2**  
**Current Position**

<b><i>Job Title</i></b>	<b><i>Number</i></b>
Reference Librarian	25
Library Administrator	4
Collection Development Librarian	2
Special Collections Librarian	1
Systems Librarian	1
Circulation/Access Services Librarian	1
Technical Services Librarian	1
Personnel Librarian	1
Other	3

### **Looking back**

The participants were then asked to rate their experience as a Graduate Assistant and gauge the usefulness of the program as training for their first professional position. (Figure 3) Overall, the respondents felt that the graduate assistant program was highly useful because of the training and preparation it provided

Figure 3

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Usefulness of graduate assistant experience	96%(47)	4% (2)			
Training was adequate preparation	80%(39)	18% (9)		2% (1)	
Graduate assistance					
Experience continues to be useful	71%(35)	24%(12)		4% (2)	
I would recommend the					

program to current students	92%(45)	6%(3)	2%(1)
-----------------------------	---------	-------	-------

Clearly, most participants in the program thought that the program provided them with the knowledge and skills to begin their first job as a librarian, while many feel that the program continues to be useful as their careers progress.

### **A Meaningful Experience**

Respondents were asked what the most memorable part of being involved in the graduate assistant program was. Some cited the friends they made as well as the professional contacts that were cultivated during their assistantships. Teamwork and camaraderie with other graduate assistants and librarians was mentioned most often. Several cited the value of the ongoing training they received throughout their assistantship, which helped them to develop skills and experience using the library's vast resources. The opportunity to be mentored by experienced librarians was also noted. One former graduate assistant commented, "This experience gave me the opportunity to work in a professional setting and observe and work with experienced librarians. The librarians also helped me with my resume."

One respondent noted, "The assistantship provided great hands on experience. So many library science students have no experience, so every bit of experience helped me a great deal in trying to find a job and performing at my job. Getting the experience needed to command a higher salary after graduation". Another wrote "My tenure as a graduate assistant allowed me to put into practice things I learned in [library] school. It forced me to hone my reference skills and think on my feet."

While most graduate assistants spoke positively about their experience, some also gave suggestions to consider for possible improvements to the program. Some of the suggestions included:

- More emphasis on teaching and information literacy.
- Expand the program to include other departments within the library beyond the reference department.
- More opportunities to work on special projects. Ensure that work is meaningful, minimize clerical work.
- More formal and informal mentoring
- Offer more assistantship
- More technology training

Some of the suggestions, including adding assistantships and rotating between departments have been implemented since the survey were completed.

### **Graduate Assistant program today**

Since its inception in 1976, the graduate assistant program has continued to change and grow. In January 2006, the USF School of Library and Information Science was awarded an Institute of Library and Museum Services (IMLS) grant to fund the Academic Librarians for Tomorrow's Academic Researchers (ALSTARS) initiative. This initiative is a partnership between LIS and USF, UCF and FAU. The goal is to educate a cohort of future academic librarians throughout the state of Florida. Part of the education is an assistantship in the library. The assistantship is tailored to coincide with coursework. The addition of the graduate assistants from the ALSTARS program has added a new dimension to the program. A graduate assistant will typically spend their tenure at the Tampa Library working in several different departments including reference, technical services, digitization, special collections, human resources, media resources, and collection development communications. In recent semesters, Grad Assistants have also been trained to participate in the library instruction program, providing instruction to freshmen and undergrads. The graduate assistant program also gives the opportunity for work throughout the USF library system. Graduate assistants now have assignments that take them to the Shimberg Health Science Center Library, the Nelson Poynter Library at USF St. Petersburg and the library at the Florida Mental Health Institute at USF.

### **Looking Toward the Future**

During the past thirty years, the Graduate Assistant Program has changed dramatically. Some of the change reflects changes in the program from assistance with classes to experience in all areas of the Tampa Library and other USF Libraries. Other changes reflect new opportunities in librarianship.

Graduate assistants in the program have always remained integrally involved as the Library embraced the changes within the field of librarianship. Graduate Assistants gained experience with a variety of electronic databases in all disciplines as these were added to the Library's resources. Graduate students have been introduced to the concepts of active learning and have been able utilize some of the methods in classes they have taught. The opportunity to work with rare artifacts and materials in Special Collections has also been available to some of the students. Special projects in Media Resources, Electronic Resources, Technical Services and Technology have also been part of the experience in recent years.

Although the graduate assistant assignments have changed to reflect the growth and change in librarianship, the overall experience has remained positive for library science students. The experience gained from the program is an important part of their education. Offering unique opportunities will continue to be the focus of the Graduate Assistant Program and the experience will benefit both the library school students and the libraries.

### **References**

- Jones, P. J., Varghese, V. M., & Parsch, J. H. (2004). Graduate assistants at the university of arkansas libraries: Past, future, and significance, part I. *Arkansas Libraries*, 61(4), 6-10.

Nahl, D., Coder, A., & Black, J. (1994). Effectiveness of fieldwork at an information desk: A prototype for academic library-library school collaboration. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 20, 291-294.

Spencer, D. B., Baker, A. L., & Stoddart, R. A. (2005). Striving for success: Practical advice for reference graduate assistants (and other new reference providers). *The Southeastern Librarian*, 53(1), 26-34.

Stephenson, N. K., & St. Clair, L. C. (1996). Extending the clan: Graduate assistantships in the reference department. *Reference Services Review*, 24(3), 29-36.

Womack, K., & Rupp-Serrano, K. J. (2000). The librarian's apprentice: Reference graduate assistants. *Reference Services Review*, 28(2), 119-129.

Wu Qi. (2003). Win-win strategy for the employment of reference graduate assistants in academic libraries. *Reference Services Review*, 31(2), 141-153